

NOTES FOR QUERIES

Hamlin Garland's Negative Use of Folk Elements

Examination of the works of Hamlin Garland will prove that in at least some of the pieces he was influenced by folklore and utilized it in his writing. In the Southern Folklore Quarterly of 1961, Ray B. Browne explained the use of popular and folk songs as unifying forces in four of Garland's autobiographical works.¹ Evidence that he was influenced by a wider spectrum of folk material is easily found in two of his best-known pieces of fiction: Rose of Dutcher's Coolly² and Main-Travelled Roads.³ Garland's portrayal of life in these works is realistic, even naturalistic, and he uses such folk elements as motifs, character types, games and songs, folk speech, and others traditionally associated with folklore to provide part of the texture of real life in these works.

The use of the folk elements in these works has, in some cases, a peculiar aspect in its handling. This technique can best be described by saying that Garland often uses folk elements negatively or in reverse, perhaps to stress the dreary existence of the farm people. In his use in Rose of Dutcher's Coolly of the proverbial "Old friends are the best after all,"⁴ a close parallel with the proverb "Old friends and old wine are the best,"⁵ the absence of wine from Garland's version of the statement suggests the absence of wine from the people's diet and, perhaps, the lack of social life inherently implied in the proverb. Garland's farm characters live close to the soil, a traditional Earth-Mother image, and should draw strength from it. But those who are closest to it, those who must depend on it for sustenance, are depleted rather than fulfilled by their efforts. Will Hannan in "A Branch-Road," and Rose in Rose of Dutcher's Coolly, for example, are successful, but they leave the farm to achieve success, as does Howard McLain in "Up the Coulé." The only apparently happy, leisurely people, the ones who fit the image cultivated by the pastoral myth, are those who live in the city and are not dependent on the land. It is they who can appreciate the folk traditions and music. The people who are too tired to dance in "Up the Coulé" are good examples of what is happening among the folk. There are no happy festivals in these stories -- only hard work, sore muscles, and bleeding hands. The only event close to a festival, besides the carnival in Rose, is the fair in "A Branch-Road." By missing his appointment to take his sweetheart to the fair when his buggy loses a wheel, Will Hannan develops a situation which is destined to cause all concerned a great deal of trouble. In "Among the Corn-Rows" Rob Rodemaker's search for a mate is a love quest, but the love search degenerates into a mechanical process dictated by harsh conditions. Julie, his wife-to-be, accepts his proposal more to escape from a way of life than to find love. "The Return of a Private" fits the quest pattern of the call to adventure, the initiation stage, and the return, but the pitiable conditions under which he returns show a negative aspect. The man is currently not a miles gloriosus in any but an ironic or negative sense. The "Wise Old Man" motif (J151: "Wisdom from old person") also fits into this negative usage because the old man in "A Branch-Road" shows very little wisdom. The way of life has destroyed the expected sagacity of age and caused senility to result. In "Under the Lion's Paw" there is a parallel with the "Deceptive Bargain" (K100) but in reverse: the speculator wins and the downtrodden are again pushed into the mud or rural existence to be sapped further of the energy which makes life worth more.

These negative uses by Garland certainly increase the force of his condemnation of the rustic way of life. The comment is, of course, Garland's pronouncement on the agrarian myth, and the negative use of the folk elements plays a significant part in the treatment.

Notes

1. Ray B. Browne, "Popular and Folk Songs: Unifying Force in Garland's Autobiographical Works," Southern Folklore Quarterly 25 (1961): 153-166. The works are Trail-Makers of the Middle Border, A Son of the Middle Border, A Daughter of the Middle Border, and Back Trailers from the Middle Border.
2. Hamlin Garland, Rose of Dutcher's Coolly, ed. Donald Pizer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969). This work is a republication of the 1895 or first edition of the novel.
3. Hamlin Garland, Main-Travelled Roads, ed. Thomas A. Bledsoe (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967). This is a republication of the 1891 or first edition of this series of short stories.
4. Rose of Dutcher's Coolly, p. 117.
5. Burton Stevenson, The Home Book of Proverbs, Maxims and Familiar Phrases (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), p. 904, n. 2.

Lawrence Clayton
Department of English
Texas Tech University
Lubbock, Texas

Request for Papers

I am soliciting papers for a seminar on folklore and literature to be held at the Modern Language Association meeting at Chicago, December, 1973. The aim of this seminar is to explore the nature of the relationship between folklore and literature, i.e., to examine folklore function in literature. I would like to receive theoretical papers, or papers which deal with the function of folklore in the works of a single writer. These papers, which should be between ten and twenty pages in length, will be distributed to the seminar participants before the seminar takes place and discussed at the seminar, if accepted. All papers must be received before September 1, 1973. Send to: Professor Judith Hass, Comparative Literature Program, Ballantine Hall 402, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana 47401.